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ABSTRACT

The nonverbal behavior patterns and perceptions of males and females were investigated. Undergraduate students (N=36 men and N=30 women) viewed a series of high-contrast slides portraying two actors standing side by side. Half of the subjects saw slides depicting the person on the left touching the shoulder of the person on the right, while control subjects saw slides depicting no touch between the actors. Within each condition, subjects viewed all four possible combinations of male-female pairs. Subjects were asked to rate both actors on three primary dimensions of status/dominance, instrumentality/assertiveness, and warmth/expressiveness, as well as on sexual desire present. Results indicated that: (1) the toucher was seen as higher on each of the dimensions than the receiver; (2) male-male pairs were rated higher on status/dominance than any pair including a woman; and (3) cross-sex pairs were perceived as indicating more sexual desire than were same-sex pairs.
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# Perceptions of Same-Sex and Cross-Sex Touching: It's Better to Give than to Receive*

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Research within the field of social psychology indicates substantial overlap between areas of research on nonverbal communication patterns and that of research on sex roles and stereotypes. In particular, differences in the nonverbal communication patterns of women and men have been noted on a number of dimensions. For example, women tend to: smile more, maintain more eye contact, have less physical space, have less personal territory, have more circumscribed demeanors, and are touched more. Men, on the other hand, tend to stare more, point more, interrupt more, have larger personal space and larger personal territory, have more relaxed demeanors, and tend to touch more.

It has been argued provocatively by Nancy Henley (1977) that these different patterns of nonverbal communication for men and women reflect the superior/dominant role of men and the inferior/submissive role of women in our society. Similarly, Irene Frieze (1974) has asserted that the nonverbal cues of men reflect dominance, whereas those typically employed by women reflect emotional warmth. These nonverbal behavior patterns are highly consistent with existing sex-role stereotypes of women and men in our culture. There is ample evidence from a number of sources that stereotypes of women and men differ, that both women as well as men tend to share these stereotypes, and that the typical woman in our culture is perceived less positively than the typical man in our culture.

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One specific nonverbal behavior which appears at first glance to violate these sex-role stereotypes is that of touch. Although touch has been described as the most basic of all of our sensory processes, of all areas of nonverbal communication, the least is known about the meaning of touch. Traditionally, touch has been considered to convey friendship and warmth (Mehrabian, 1972) or sexual intimacy (Jourard & Rubin, 1968). And most research on touch has considered only the emotional and positive aspects of touch.

Since emotional warmth is a characteristic stereotypically associated with women and/or feminine behavior in our culture, however, one might expect women to touch others more than do men. In fact, the reverse is true. Both observational and self-report data indicate that men are more likely to be the initiators of touch, whereas women are more likely to be the recipients of touch (Henley, 1973; Jourard, 1966; Jourard & Rubin, 1968). But if touch conveys warmth and expressiveness, traits stereotypically ascribed to women, why should men touch more than women?

The reason, according to Henley, is that touch also conveys dominance, status, superiority and power -- traits characteristically associated with the role of men in our culture. Henley argues that touch is a status privilege. For example, imagine the following: doctor with nurse, boss with secretary, older person with younger person. Who is more likely to touch whom? The high status person has the privilege of touching the lower status person. Furthermore, Henley asserts that touch can act as a status indicator when used nonreciprocally. That is, one person may impose or assert status or dominance over another through the use of touch. In addition, she suggests that while women will not necessarily interpret a

man's touch as implying sexual intent, men will interpret a woman's touch as sexual in nature.

Henley makes a distinction between reciprocal and nonreciprocal touch. Nonreciprocal touch, she asserts, indicates power, dominance and status, whereas reciprocal, or mutual, touch, indicates solidarity relationships (e.g., friends). Thus, according to Henley, the two hypotheses of intimacy and dominance are complimentary. One describes reciprocal touch, the other describes nonreciprocal touch.

In support of Henley's arguments concerning nonreciprocal touch, research indicates that touching appears to be associated with higher status variables such as being male, older, or of high socio-economic status (Henley, 1973). In addition, research indicates that persons do use touch as a means of conveying dominance over another person (Alber, note 1).

Thus, we see that theorists have argued that nonreciprocal touch is primarily warm and expressive in nature, or that nonreciprocal touch is primarily a conveyer of status and dominance. Which is right? Unfortunately, no study has looked at these dimensions simultaneously. Is nonreciprocal touch seen as conveying warmth or dominance or both? How are touchers vs. recipients of touch evaluated on these dimensions? In other words, how are touchers vs. recipients perceived by others? Is the exact same behavior in women and men, initiating and receiving touch, perceived in the same way by observers? These are some of the questions the present study addressed.

## Method

Thirty-six men and 30 women undergraduates viewed a series of high contrast slides portraying two persons, who I shall call actors, standing side by side. Half of the subjects saw slides depicting the person on the

left touching the person on the right on the shoulder. Control subjects saw slides depicting no-touch between actors. One gesture, hand to shoulder, was selected. This gesture has been found to be relatively neutral with respect to gender. Actors were selected to be relatively equal in attractiveness and status (e.g., age, dress). Within each condition, subjects viewed all four possible combinations of male-female pairs. Subjects were asked to rate both actors (e.g., both the toucher and the recipient) in each slide on a series of adjectives. These adjectives reflected three primary dimensions: status/dominance, instrumentality/assertiveness, and warmth/expressiveness. In addition, subjects were asked to rate each pair on the sexual desire present.

## Results

With respect to perceived dominance and status of the actors, we found no differences between the actors in the no-touch control (NT) slides. However, in the touch slides, the toucher (T) was seen as higher in dominance and status than the recipient (R). Furthermore, the T was seen as higher on these dimensions than the NT control, while the R was seen as lower on these dimensions than the NT control. Thus, the toucher gained in perceived status and dominance, whereas the recipient lost status and dominance relative to the NT control pairs. (see Table 1) Surprisingly, no differences were found for male vs. female toucher or male vs. female recipient on these dimensions. Consistent with the stereotype that men are higher in status and dominance than are women, in the NT control slides, male-male pairs tended to be rated higher on status and dominance than any pair which included a woman. This effect did not occur in ratings of touch interactions, indicating that the act of touching neutralizes the overall ratings of a pair, i.e., it raises the status

and dominance of the T and lowers that of the R, regardless of the sex of the actors.

With respect to the perceived warmth and expressiveness of the actors, we again found no differences between actors in the NT pictures. But when actors involved in touching were evaluated, the same pattern as above was found. That is, the T was seen as higher on this dimension than was the R. Also, the T was seen as more warm and expressive than the NT control, whereas the R was seen as less warm and expressive than the NT control. Thus, the toucher gained, whereas the recipient lost, relative to a person not involved in a touch interaction.

Consistent with stereotypes of women and men, we found that women, overall, were seen as higher in warmth/expressiveness than were men. In particular, when touch interactions were evaluated, the female toucher was seen as conveying more warmth and expressiveness than was the male toucher. Male-male pairs were rated lower on this dimension than was any pair which included a female.

With respect to the instrumentality/assertiveness dimension, we found once again the same pattern for perceptions of the toucher and the recipient of touch. No difference between actors was observed for NT controls. Within touch pictures, however, the T was rated higher than the R, the T was rated higher than the NT control, and the R was rated lower than the NT control.

Contrary to traditional stereotypes, males were not rated higher on this dimension than were females. Also, there were no effects for sex of T or sex of R. In evaluations of NT pictures, same-sex pairs were rated as more assertive than were cross-sex pairs. This effect did not occur for touch

pictures. Touch again served as a neutralizing agent for the pair, raising the perceived assertiveness of the T and lowering that of the R, regardless of the sex of the actors.

With respect to ratings of the sexual desire present in the pair, cross-sex pairs were seen as indicating more sexual desire than were same-sex pairs. There was no evidence that touch, in general, was seen as implying more sexual intent than was non-touch. Nor was evidence obtained for Henley's hypothesis that a female touching a male will be seen as implying more sexual intent than a male touching a female (See Table 1)

## Discussion

Perceptions of touchers and recipients of touch on the dimensions of status/dominance, instrumentality/assertiveness, and warmth/expressiveness could best be summed up with the phrase "It's better to give than to receive." Nonreciprocal touch does not benefit both parties involved, at least, not in the eyes of impartial observers. In nonreciprocal touch interactions, it is the toucher who gains in perceived status, dominance, assertiveness, and expressiveness. The recipient of touch loses with respect to these variables, i.e., the person who is touched by another is seen as lower in status, more submissive, less confident, less independent, understanding, friendly, etc.

These data, when combined with the results of observational studies which indicate that men are more likely to be the initiators of touch and that women are more likely to be the recipients of touch, have disturbing implications for how the nonverbal communication patterns of women vs. men are perceived. Women are more likely to be the recipients of touch. Our data indicate that recipients are not only perceived as lower in status

and more submissive than touchers, but they are also rated lower than either touchers or people who are not involved in nonreciprocal touch on a number of positive dimensions such as independence, confidence, understanding, and friendliness. In contrast, touchers, who are most likely to be men, gain over recipients of touch or persons not involved in nonreciprocal touch on all of these dimensions.

It was surprising that few effects were observed for the sex of the toucher or recipient. That is, contrary to Henley's assumptions, the woman who initiated touch was not seen more negatively than was the man who initiated touch. Correspondingly, the man who was the recipient of touch was seen no differently from the woman who was the recipient of nonreciprocal touch -- both lost equally. These data, of course, are based on observers impressions of touch interactions. There is much evidence from social psychological research that actors who are involved in an event often differ from observers in their evaluation of that event. It is highly possible that the male actor who is actually the recipient of a female's touch may react more negatively than will a female actor who is the recipient of a male's touch.

The generalizations and implications that can be drawn from this first look at the meaning of touch are limited by a number of factors, and future research is needed to clarify several issues. First of all, we need to examine the context in which touch occurs. This may greatly affect the meaning ascribed to touch. Secondly, we need to investigate the relationship of the actors as an important determinant of the meaning of touch. Thirdly, we need to explore perceptions of reciprocal touch as well as non-reciprocal touch. For example, are there power or status dimensions present in reciprocal touch as well? Are mutual touchers rated up, down, or the

same as pairs who are not touching? Fourth, we need to study touch as a process over time. What happens when one person (such as the recipient of an initial touch) touches the original toucher back? Does this neutralize the original toucher's advantage? Can reciprocated touch be used as a way of diffusing the negative implications of being the recipient of touch? Finally, as was pointed out earlier, it is important to consider how actors themselves, such as the recipient of touch, will evaluate themselves and the person who touched them on these dimensions of warmth, dominance, assertiveness and sexuality. In other words, it is important to compare actor vs. observer differences in the perception of the meaning of touch.

RATINGS OF STATUS/DOMINANCE*

| | Toucher (Left) | | Recipient (Right) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Touch Interaction | 9.36** | > | 7.61 |
| | ∨ | | ∧ |
| No-Touch Interaction | 8.73 | = | 8.44 |

*$F(i, 62) = 31.13$, $p < .0001$
**Higher scores indicate higher status and dominance

RATINGS OF WARMTH/EXPRESSIVENESS*

| | Toucher (Left) | | Recipient (Right) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Touch Interaction | 10.01** | > | 8.25 |
| | v | | ^ |
| No-Touch Interaction | 8.99 | = | 8.87 |

*$F(1, 62) = 49.98$, $p < .0001$

**Higher scores indicate greater friendliness, playfulness, and understanding

RATINGS OF ASSERTIVENESS/INSTRUMENTALITY*

| | Toucher (Left) | | Recipient (Right) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Touch Interaction | 10.34** | > | 7.20 |
| | v | | ^ |
| No-Touch Interaction | 8.90 | = | 8.63 |

*$F(1, 62) = 70.26$, $p < .0001$

**Higher scores indicate greater independence, confidence, and aggressiveness

RATINGS OF SEXUAL DESIRE*

| | | Sex of Actor on Right: Male | | Sex of Actor on Right: Female |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sex of Actor on Left | Male | 2.89** | < | 8.66 |
| | | ^ | | v |
| | Female | 8.44 | > | 3.42 |

*$F(1,62) = 380.49, p < .0001$

**Higher scores indicate greater sexual desire present in pair